

Summary of Telephone Interview with **John M. Horvath** by Richard Killblane, 28 May 2002.

A Tale of Two Truck Tours

CPT John Horvath had been a transportation officer in charge of household goods in Germany. Because of the draw down of troops in Germany nearly everyone was going to Vietnam, beginning in the middle of 1965. He reported to Ft Bragg, NC on Memorial Day 1966. He assumed command of the 64th Medium Truck Company, which was ordered to deploy to Vietnam. Horvath was excited to receive a company command and happy to go to Vietnam. He believed that we planned to win the war.

Horvath deployed with the 64th Company to Vietnam in July 1966. After eighteen days aboard the USNS General John Pope and passing the international date line on 30 Jul 66, the unit arrived in RVN in August. Its parent battalion would not deploy with it since the 64th TOE was designed for the company to act independently. The 64th had its own personnel specialist and a finance specialist, and a property book. They followed the procedures according to the deployment AR and eventually moved with a full complement of 60 task vehicles, and 186 officers and men. The movement included a number of steps. The advance party went by air to RVN. The vehicles were shipped via Charleston with an escort party. The main body flew by air charter from Pope AFB to McChord AFB, near Ft Lewis, Washington, then went by bus to the Tacoma Airport. The 64th became a part of those deploying with the 4th Infantry Division from Ft Lewis. Horvath made arrangements for the company mascot, a German Shepherd named Huntz, complete with dog tags (no pun intended) and shot record and company orders, to accompany the unit. When the year was almost over, a collection was taken up, and the dog's return to Ft Bragg with one of the mechanics, via commercial air, was also arranged.

Their original destination was supposed to be Cam Ranh Bay but when they arrived by ship at Qui Nhon, Chief Warrant Officer George Sebeny came aboard and informed them they had to get off there. This caught them by surprise since they had not prepared the equipment for offloading. Their destination had changed before they arrived.

The 64th Company was assigned to the 27th Battalion at Qui Nhon. The other companies included the 2nd Medium Truck (12-ton), 541st Light Truck (2 ½ ton), 359th Medium Petroleum Truck (12-ton) and 597th Medium Cargo Truck (12-ton). LTC Leo T. McMahon was the commander of the 27th Battalion. He had a daily command and staff meeting every evening at 1900 hours. He changed the times of his commanders meeting so his officers could not go to Mass when the Archbishop of the Catholic Military Ordinariate visited Qui Nhon. He did the same thing when Bob Hope visited and put on a show at the hanger of the Qui Nhon airfield. He was not popular. BG Albert Hunter was the Commander of the Qui Nhon Support Command. At that time the TC Battalion took all the taskings directly from the Support Command. About two months after their arrival in country, the members of the 64th had a nasty surprise, which had

nothing to do with the enemy. The Qui Nhon Support Command conducted a peacetime Annual General Inspection on the unit. They sent down twenty-two inspectors and the company only had eighteen officers and NCOs to escort them. Horvath felt that it was entirely unrealistic to inspect a company by peacetime standards when trucks were on the road every day in a 100% effort which never went below a 100% effort, and absolutely nothing else was operated according to peacetime standards.

The line of communication ran from Qui Nhon west along Rte 19 to Pleiku where the 4th Infantry Division and 173rd Airborne Brigade were stationed. There was one ice truck run each day to the Bong Son Airbase, and occasionally they received a tasking to haul several trailers north up Rte 1 to the Air Base at Bong Son.

Horvath rotated the convoy commander responsibility with three, later two, platoon leaders of the company. When on the convoy duty, Horvath woke up every morning at 0200 then reported to the company operations office to learn how many vehicles he had available and what NCO was on the duty roster for the day for assistant convoy commander. When the 64th was new to Vietnam it still had its full complement of officers. Horvath would rotate as the duty as convoy commander with his lieutenants. That way he would pull the duty about every four days. As he began to lose officers to other assignments, he pulled the duty every three days. The other companies were "too beat up" to have enough officers to lead convoys. They had either lost officers due to rotations back to the United States or they had been pulled up to staff.

At 0230, he reported to the battalion headquarters. The operations officer would brief what taskings they had that day. The company representatives would report what trucks they had available and would receive their assignments.

At 0400, the men ate breakfast in his company mess. They usually woke up at 0330. At about 0420, Horvath would stand up and announce which trucks had to pick up trailers at the different supply depots or at the port of Qui Nhon. Depots were broken down by classes of supply. 64th Company did not have enough extra drivers for assistants since it had to put fifteen men and an NCO on guard duty each day, plus battalion detail, plus company detail to build the facilities. After breakfast, the drivers drove their tractors to the depots to pick up their trailers. This was the point of origin. If their assigned trailer was not ready then they could drive over to the trailer transfer point (TTP) and pick up an incidental load.

At 0630, the trucks assembled in the marshalling area at Cha Rang Valley (about the size of two football fields) in front of the TTP. On the average each convoy had about 110 vehicles, half from the 64th and the others from the other companies.

At 0705, the convoy commander would give the outbound brief and make a list of vehicles by bumper number in the convoy. He would keep track of which trucks did not make it back from the depots. Sometimes the depots would not have the load ready. The manifest was for the convoy commander's own reference for accountability. He did not have to turn it in. Horvath lined up the trucks by companies with the 64th in the lead.

He had his assistant convoy commander ride up front while he lined up as the last vehicle. Since the trucks had no radios, this was the only way he would discover any problems. He kept the 5-ton "bob tail" recovery vehicle with a mechanic doing the driving, and a spare bobtail, in front of him to fix any mechanical problems. During the day's run, he would move up and down the convoy, and sometimes have the assistant convoy commander positioned at the rear of the convoy.

Horvath also issued his men C rations for the road. The other companies did not. If they drew an issue of C rations then it counted against the A rations for the mess hall. Horvath discovered that the Quartermaster depot in Pleiku would issue him a pallet of C rations without charging it against his A rations account which was maintained in Qui Nhon. This was at least some small repayment for having to suffer through two dry seasons and two monsoon seasons all in the same year.

At 0710, the convoy departed.

By 0915 they arrived at An Khe, the home of the 1st Air Cavalry Division. The slow drive up the An Khe pass and later the Mang Yang pass usually took the convoys almost an hour to drive. They again would marshal to see if they had any maintenance problems. There were usually two to three other ARVN or US convoys ahead of them waiting at that checkpoint. The MPs would release one convoy and wait for a given amount of time before releasing the next. This was to keep the convoys from bunching up. There was no designated schedule for convoys. All the bridges had been blown and the bypasses reduced traffic to a single lane. At about 0945, Horvath's convoy would depart again.

They usually arrived at Pleiku about 1130. The trucks would disperse to their designated depots to drop off their trailers and pick up an empty. Pleiku only had depots and a TTP and the 4th Infantry Div base camp. They would line up in the marshaling area at around 1400. As Horvath waited, he would check to see what he was missing. Sometimes a truck would have to remain at Pleiku over night because its trailer had not been emptied. If so the drivers had to sleep in the cabs as there were no billets set up for them.

At 1420, they would depart. If they delayed too long then the MPs would not let them leave because they had the responsibility to close down the road. Although there was not much of a danger during this era before the ambushes from Sep 67 to Sep 68, the MPs did not want any convoys out at night. The Republic of Korea soldiers outside Qui Nhon would close down their portion of the roads at night and not let any vehicles pass.

By 1900, the convoy rolled into the Cha Rang Valley area. The marshaling area was the release point. The drivers knew exactly what they had to do and where they had to go. The drivers scattered to their respective company area.. After dropping off their trailers they returned to the company area for maintenance. Horvath had organized what he called "circus maintenance." 1st platoon would check and replace the tires, 2nd platoon would wash the trucks with the water from a well they had dug and 3rd platoon would pull after operations maintenance with each driver. Any problems they could not fix by

2130, they drove the truck over to the company motor pool where the "night owls" worked on it all night. There was no scheduled maintenance down time for trucks. All available trucks drove every day. Mechanics performed maintenance at night and during the day. What would run the next day was returned to the platoon. What could be fixed by company maintenance was set up for repair. What needed support maintenance was prepared for turn in to ordnance.

The men would then eat dinner and go to bed. At 0215 the next morning the next convoy commander would report to the company operations office to see what tractors were available and the process would repeat all over again.

When not escorting a convoy, Horvath performed his regular company commander duties. The paperwork did not stop on account of the war. Since his unit had just arrived in country, he spent a lot of time scrounging for building materials for his company. He also visited the depots to learn how they did business and see what he could do to reduce the time his drivers had to wait to pick up their loads. Most of this could be accomplished by just making friends with the depot personnel.

Horvath was happiest when out with a convoy. He never saw any of the other commanders leading convoys though. On account of personnel losses and shortage of officers, he believed that they were busy just trying to keep their heads above water.

Drivers were dedicated. They knew what they had to do. One only had to tell them where to pick up their load. Horvath never had to check up on them. At line up, he only had to wait for them to show up so he could get a list of the bumper numbers.

The "heavy lifter" drivers were the most independent. These 20-ton tractor and "low boy" trailers were pulled from engineer units and consolidated into a squad of about eight or ten. Their task was to go to Pleiku and pick up broken tanks or M113 Armored Personnel Carriers and bring them back to Qui Nhon. Since the tractors were so slow they could not keep up with the convoys. They drove Rte 19 alone with a $\frac{3}{4}$ ton truck.

Coming in and pulling maintenance until late at night did not give the drivers much time off for relaxation or sleep. They slept whenever they could; waiting for line up in Qui Nhon or waiting in the marshaling area at Pleiku. They took naps in the cabs of their trucks. If their truck worked, the drivers were on the road. Guard duty was the only time they received a break from driving. Then they had two hours on guard and four off throughout the day.

Because of the long hours, Horvath ran his mess hall 24-hours a day. The men could drop in any time to eat from the buffet line. He also established a company club, which was named the "Crow's Nest" because the manager's name was "Crow". He bought pallets of soda and beer, which they sold. The profits went into an official incidental fund for purchase of supplies from the local economy. He was able to have his wife send him things which were needed but not available locally such as hairnets for the ladies who worked in the mess hall, and toilet seats for the obvious use over the plywood holes.

They had received an issue of rubber overshoes and arctic sleeping bags from the logistic office of Ft Bragg before they deployed for Vietnam. Horvath thought that was strange, until he arrived. The nights in the Central Highlands were cold. The Monsoon rains also turned the company area and all other location into a sea of mud so the overshoes proved valuable.

The 64th Company had Mack diesel-powered M52A1s. They had much more horsepower for hauling heavy loads up hill than the gasoline-powered M52s of the 2nd and 597th Companies. Those trucks were old and beat up. In the spring of 1967, the other companies began to receive the turbo-charged M52A2s and International Loadstars as replacements. The M52A2s had less horsepower than the A1s. The Loadstars were civilian designed tractors with single screws. The Tank Automotive Command pulled them out of assignment to Transportation Motor Pools in the United States and sent them to Vietnam. However, they could not pull heavy loads and were eventually given only light loads. The M52A1s of the 64th had to drive up to the trailer in front of it and push the slower trucks on the climb up to the passes.

The medium truck companies had 120 trailers each. Upon arrival at Qui Nhon, Horvath turned his trailers over to the trailer transfer detachment. Although they remained on the company commander's property book, he never saw the same trailers again. This created a problem in that he had no control over the trailers and could not perform maintenance on them. There were no loading docks for the rough terrain forklifts (RTFL) to drive onto the trailers. Instead they would drop the sideboards and load from the sides. Unfortunately, the forklifts had to drive on top of the sideboards, breaking them. Maintenance of the trailers became a problem that was eventually solved when the 8th Group set up a consolidated trailer maintenance unit, took two mechanics from each of the medium companies, located it across the road from the Cha Rang Valley trailer transfer point.

The performance of drivers was measured in miles driven and safety record. The 64th Company drove over two and a half million miles during its first ten months in country. The company operations sergeant kept track of the number of miles each driver drove and his safety record. Beginning in 1969, after safe driving of several thousand miles, the company awarded the driver the "line haul" tab for wear on his shoulder above his First Logistics Command patch. They "were really proud of it." It was the equivalent to a combat infantryman badge to an infantryman.

In the first week in May 1967, the 64th Company became the first medium truck company to relocate to Pleiku. Someone wanted to establish a line haul system like Europe to manage two convoys a day in each direction. One convoy out of Qui Nhon would run loaded trailers to the TTP at An Khe. A convoy out of Pleiku would run empty trailers to An Khe and pick up the loaded ones. The convoy out of Qui Nhon would return with the empty trailers. The 64th was able to do two runs to An Khe on an intermittent basis, but this came to an end with the beginning of the ambushes in September. The real problem was the lack of an equipment supply system at Tank Automotive Command. Replacement tractors were not available during this period and

the number of tractors in the 64th Truck Company went from 60 to 45 to 36 in late 1967, a real waste of a unit. Now they were able to see just what had happened to the 2nd Medium Truck Company and to the 597th Medium Truck Company before them, as then the 64th "Kings of the Road" Medium Truck Company joined the others as being totally used up without proper support.

Horvath put armor plating on the front of and on the sides of his M151 jeep. This was the first armored vehicle at Qui Nhon. He was trying to think ahead although the enemy presented no serious threat at that time. No ambush occurred during his first tour. He named the gun jeep, the "Patmobile" in honor of his wife, Pat. He also painted "Batman" on his side and "Robin" on the driver's side. The front plate came up to nearly the top of the windshield leaving a narrow slit to look over. He mounted first a .30 caliber and then a .50 caliber machinegun on the back but had no place to test fire his weapon. The convoys did not test fire their jeep mounted machine guns during that portion of the tour. At one stop at an infantry position, they gave him permission to fire his machinegun into a hill.

In May 1967, he received a new driver. Battalion broke up the 64th and sent their drivers to other companies so that all the men in the company would not rotate back to the United States at the same time. Horvath received drivers who did not know how to drive M52 tractors. He assigned his faithful driver, Pharoh Manley, with whom he had covered 20,000 miles in the Patmobile, to a tractor and put a new driver on his jeep. In the dark of the first morning at the new location at Pleiku, at the marshalling area in May of 1967, his new driver drove the jeep into a ditch and it rolled, breaking his leg in several places. Horvath had to return to the United States.

While back in the United States, Horvath read Bernard Fall's book, *Street Without Joy*, which described the French experience in Indochina. He was especially interested in the chapter on the destruction of French Mobile Group 100 along Rte 19 to Pleiku. He sent a copy of the book to COL Joe Bellino who commanded 8th Transportation Group in Qui Nhon at that time. Bellino wrote back to Horvath thanking him for that book and noting that it was in great demand among the officers.

When Horvath first went to Vietnam, he went over there to win the war for democracy. He did not encounter any antiwar sentiment after his return. In fact he was surprised at the lack of understanding about the war. At a dinner with his relatives someone asked him about his feelings about going back to Vietnam for his upcoming second tour. He said he did not care to be separated from his wife and two small children. Someone asked why he could not take them with him, that the impression that these civilians had was that, even in 1967, military personnel took their families with them to Viet Nam. As a Regular Army officer, he did not have a choice about going to Vietnam for a second tour. As a matter of fact, The Transportation Chief of Personnel bragged about the high percentage of Transportation Corps officers going to Vietnam regardless of whether it was their first or second tours, and regardless of the fact that other service corps branches had many officers who had not yet gone to the RVN on their first tour. Furthermore, many transportation corps officers were filling slots which were not

transportation corps slots. On his second tour he had no indication of the withdrawal. He had not heard of Nixon's promise in 1969 to start pulling troops out. MACV units invaded Cambodia while he was there. To him the Army still planned to win.

MAJ Horvath became the Executive Officer (XO) for the 54th Transportation Battalion during his second tour in Vietnam, which began in June or July 1969. The 54th Battalion was billeted in Cha Rang Valley and across was a Post Exchange, the marshalling area, a petroleum tank farm, and the consolidated trailer maintenance unit. His first battalion commander was LTC, later BG, William Sarber. LTC Everett Wayne Rackley was his next battalion commander. The 54th Battalion was part of 8th Transportation Group, which included the 27th Battalion commanded by Wayne Rackley's brother and the 124th Battalion. The 54th Battalion had the 512th Light Truck (5-ton), 523rd Light Truck (5-ton) 669th Light Truck (5-ton) companies and the 504th Transportation (Trailer Transfer) Detachment.

The 124th had Horvath's old 64th, 359th Medium Petroleum Truck, 541st Light Truck (2 ½-ton) Companies and the 520th Transportation (Trailer Transfer) Detachment. It was then billeted in Pleiku. It could send out a convoy with empty trailers to Qui Nhon while Qui Nhon sent out loaded convoys in the opposite direction. The Pleiku convoy would pick up loaded trailers while the Qui Nhon convoy would drop off theirs. This way 8th Group could put twice as many trucks on the road. Since the convoys still had to be off the road by dark, there was a limit to how many trucks they could send out in one direction. Billeting a transportation battalion at Pleiku also provided facilities for the Qui Nhon convoy that did not exist during Horvath's first tour. They had a maintenance shop to fix any problems that occurred on the road. In the event they had to remain over night, they had temporary barracks to sleep in and the 124th company mess halls in which to eat.

There were a number of notable changes in the two years between 1967 and 1969. Han Jin, a Korean contract company had moved to Qui Nhon, provided trucks and drivers for the direct haul route to Pleiku and for the other routes.. Even though they were civilians, they were great. They lined up in the convoys like anyone else, wore their steel pots and flak jackets, and drove with professional dependability.

The trailer maintenance procedure was routine during Horvath's second tour. 8th Group had the company commanders sign their trailers over to the trailer transfer detachments. Since they had control of them, the detachments gained the responsibility for scheduling their maintenance. The two trailer mechanics in each company were turned over to form an ad hoc trailer maintenance section of eight to ten men. A maintenance sergeant and warrant officer were found from the 8th Group to supervise it. This ensured that the routine and on-the-spot maintenance was performed. Because of all the breakage of sideboards, the colonel in charge of the 8th Group announced that the sideboards and tailgates would be removed in 45 days. From then on, the cargo would be secured by steel banding, and that the loading points and destination points would be responsible for the banding and cutting supplies and equipment. This reduced the maintenance problems as sideboard breakage by the forklifts represented the major

damage done to the trailers, and sped up the loading and unloading. The living conditions, which had been tents during the first tour, were now the wooden, screened, tropical buildings.

The lines of communication out of Qui Nhon stretched north along Rte 1 thirty-five miles to Bong Son, south along Rte 1 to Toy Hoa Bay and west to Pleiku. Occasionally a convoy went north to support the AMERICAL Division at Chu Lai or Tam Ky. Truck convoys lined up and departed by type. 2 ½-ton trucks ran the convoys to Tuy Hoa. The road between Qui Nhon and Tuy Hoa was so bad that only 2 ½-ton trucks could drive it. 5-ton trucks ran west past Pleiku and Kontum. They would travel on to fire bases at Dak To and beyond. Qui Nhon did not have any 5-ton trucks during Horvath's first tour. The 5-tons had drop sides for easier loading and unloading. 5-tons also made good gun truck platforms.

The NVA had conducted intense ambushes along Rte 19 between An Khe and Pleiku from September 1967 through September 1968. As a result, in December of 1967, at the suggestion of a maintenance warrant officer, COL Bellino encouraged his volunteer drivers to harden their trucks and create gun trucks. In general, there was one gun truck for each fifteen cargo vehicles. By the time Horvath returned, the ambushes had declined and were no longer the threat that they had been between September 1967 and September 1968.

As a consequence of the guntrucks, 8th Group became the "show case" transportation unit in Vietnam. It would receive visits by generals or equivalents every three or four weeks. VIP briefings to the 54th battalion area at the Cha Rang Valley had become routine. They would eat breakfast at 0600 complete with china and linen. An 8th Group command briefing with flip charts would follow, which would show all of the routes from the Cha Rang Valley marshalling area. The briefer would walk them through the entire convoy activity. They would then go listen to the convoy commander's briefing to the drivers, watch the guntrucks test fire their weapons on the hill beside the battalion compound, visit the trailer transfer point operations office, and visit the consolidated trailer maintenance facility. Because of this high visibility, the now widely-known reputation of the success of the guntrucks, the 8th Transportation Group received "water walkers" for commanders after COL Bellino's excellent leadership. In fact, several of these commanders went on to general officer rank.. These commanders did not permit anything unnecessary like IG inspections to interfere with the convoy operations.

8th Group sent taskings down to the battalions by radio at night. The depots loaded trailers according to the priorities. The battalion operations office would assign the taskings to the companies in no particular pattern, just according to what trucks were available. There were more loads than trucks to haul them. Every available truck drove. At night the company operations sergeant would report in to battalion and collect the taskings. The operations sergeant assigned the trucks to the locations. In the morning the drivers dropped by the company office to see where they had to pick up their trailer. The 5 tons and 2 ½ tons had night loading crews, so these convoy drivers just picked up their trucks.

The critical loads were prioritized. If the depots did not have the trailer ready then the driver took his tractor to the trailer transfer point in the Cha Rang Valley and picked up an available trailer. The TTPs always had dozens of loads ready.

LTC Wayne Rackley assumed command of the 124th Battalion in Pleiku upon giving up command of the 54th. He took MAJ Horvath with him as his XO. The 124th had fuel tankers designated for AVGAS, MOGAS or diesel. They would send their empty fuel trailers back to Qui Nhon but occasionally they would receive a request for more trailers of a specific type fuel than were empty. They would have to pump the product into another trailer of a higher grade product but could not pump into a lower grade product tanker. While the depots at Qui Nhon had pumping facilities, the 124th Battalion's 359 Medium Truck Tanker Company only had the "Little Joe" pony engine mounted on the side of each fuel trailer. The cleansing process to change product took all night and on one occasion, a fuel leak caught fire and burned two trailers and a tractor.

MAJ Horvath finished up his second tour with a weeklong assignment as the 8th Group transportation control officer in the 4th Infantry Division forward support base for a large operation across the Vietnam border. With a jeep, a driver, a small tent, some pierced steel planking, and a large TC flag, he became the turnaround point for the dozens of trucks, which brought in the supplies for the operation. His last official act as the XO of the 124th Transportation Battalion was to gain control of a Viet Cong cargo bicycle, which he brought back in his baggage for presentation to the Ft Eustis Transportation Museum.

The Tale of Two Truck Tours was over.